

JOINT STAFF CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

10 March 2021

*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

AGENDA ITEM No.

TITLE OF INFORMATION NOTE: HR UPDATE
INFORMATION NOTE OF THE HUMAN RESOURCES SERVICES MANAGER

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 To update the Joint Staff Consultative Committee on the progress made in the last quarter completing HR work and projects as well as our work supporting the people issues during the Coronavirus pandemic, lockdown and ongoing restrictions.

2. STEPS TO DATE

- 2.1 The HR Update Information Note contains the 2020/21 HR Service Work Plan.

3. INFORMATION TO NOTE

- 3.1 The terms of reference for the Joint Staff Consultative Committee are to be the corporate interface with employees on major Human Resources issues and to be the Strategic HR Forum for NHDC Members. HR projects often require support from other support services such as IT, Finance, Legal Services and others.

3.2 People Strategy

The coronavirus situation continues to have a big impact on the work of HR and has changed all the normal forward planning and forecasting on the economy, labour, market, pay and pensions etc. In the current circumstances we have postponed the plan for a new People Strategy for 2020 – 2026 and as an alternative a People Recovery plan has been developed. This describes how HR processes will adapt as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and how we will support our staff through this period of change. A draft of this is attached at Appendix A. This has been agreed by the Leadership Team and will have been presented to the March meeting of the Staff Consultation Forum (SCF).

Councils across Hertfordshire and the East of England region meet regularly in virtual meetings to share knowledge and experience of employment matters, and in particular to discuss issues and share ideas on current developments relating to the ongoing restrictions and employment aspects of the pandemic.

3.3 Recruitment

- 3.3.1 Since the start of the pandemic our labour turnover has declined and as a result there has been a reduction in the number of vacancies. Recruitment figures for 2020 are shown in the table below with the comparison to the previous two years:

	Applications	Interviews	Appointments	Applications ratio
2020	388	128	36	10.8
2019	640	327	81	7.9
2018	535	242	66	8.1

The impact of the pandemic on working practices within Environmental Health has recently resulted in two fixed term vacancies specifically working on track and trace. We have continued to see good levels of interest in most of our job adverts and in addition to the Environmental Health posts, we have recently appointed applicants in Waste, MSU, Legal and a new apprentice in HR.

3.3.2 **Resourcing to support the NHS**

In January we were approached to seek staff volunteers to support the NHS as the hospitals were under severe pressure. A small number of officers put their names forward, however the roles were filled with volunteers from elsewhere. There were more people interested in helping with vaccination clinics, although due to the longer-term commitment involved, we have advised that this cannot be supported in normal working hours due to the impact on our own service delivery.

3.4 **Apprentices**

We currently have 8 Apprentices, on Fixed Term Contracts, completing a range of qualifications including Events Assistant, Customer Service Specialist, Business Administration and HR Support. We also have an existing member of staff utilising the Apprentice Levy Fund for training. Although it has been challenging in the last 12 months, we have been very fortunate that all our training providers were able to transfer to remote learning, so our Apprentices were able to continue with no break in learning and we were able to continue recruiting. Two of our most recent Apprentices have been successfully recruited to other positions within the Council.

3.5 **Pay**

3.5.1 The Pay Policy Statement for 2021/2022 was presented to full Council for approval on 11 February and has now been uploaded to the council website along with an updated senior management organisation chart.

3.5.2 The Shared Internal Audit Services completed the annual payroll audit in December with the outcome of a good level of assurance. The audit report confirmed that there are appropriate controls and measures in place for the new payroll contract

3.5.3 National Pay bargaining

In mid-February the National Joint Council unions lodged their pay, and terms and conditions, claim for local government staff for 2021 which includes:

- a substantial increase of at least 10% on all spinal column points,
- a number of proposed T&C changes
 - o the introduction of a homeworking allowance,
 - o reduction of the working week to 35 hours with no loss of pay
 - o a minimum of 25 days annual leave for all starting employees
 - o and an agreement on a best practice programme of mental health support for all local authorities

A number of regional pay briefings have been scheduled in March giving local government employers an opportunity for this claim to be discussed before the LGA team respond on our behalf.

3.5.3 **£95K Exit Payment cap**

On 12th February the Government announced they had concluded that the Cap may have had unintended consequences and the Regulations should be revoked. This follows significant concerns raised in the consultation with local government employers as well as strong opposition from the unions. The Treasury have indicated their commitment to tackle the issue of high exit payments so further proposals are expected in the future.

3.6 **Employee Benefits**

3.6.1 **HolidayFlex scheme:** Following the successful trial of this scheme which allows staff to purchase additional annual leave via salary exchange, the Leadership Team has approved this as a permanent benefit. A window for applications was open throughout February allowing staff to purchase additional annual leave (up to 5 days) for the 2021-2022 leave year. A further window will be open throughout August 2021.

3.6.2 **Support for carers:** Following the December 2020 JSCC Discussion Paper on carers at work, further investigation has been undertaken into membership of *Employers for Carers* (EfC). We are able to utilise the umbrella membership held by Hertfordshire County Council allowing access to a range of benefits including the online members platform and the Carers UK Resources for Carers. These resources will be promoted to all staff through the intranet and Insight.

3.6.3 **Employee Wellbeing classes:** We have recently taken up the offer for some wellbeing classes through our Employee Advice Service provider at a small additional cost which allows staff to access a range of free online classes. These cover a variety of topics which support employees in proactively managing their physical and mental wellbeing such as nutrition, managing stress, how to improve sleep and a number of exercise classes.

3.7 **Mental Health and Wellbeing**

3.7.1 The HR team have continued to provide additional support to individuals in a number of service teams who have been extremely busy due to a mix of a high volume and the nature of additional work, and some resourcing issues. Each member of staff has had a personal welfare call from one of the HR team, and where needed the service managers have been provided with an update and further offer of support.

3.7.3 The benefits of Workplace Wellness, the council's confidential employee advice service continues to be promoted to staff through support emails to staff and managers, as well as in regular articles in the monthly Insight e-newsletter and Intranet message board posts. Feedback from Workplace Wellness is limited to high level usage figures, but the most recent report shows a consistent number of calls to the service.

3.8 **Equality and Diversity**

There is a separate Equalities Information Note which provides an update the latest equalities data which were published on 31st January.

3.9 **Shaping our Future**

The Shaping our Future programme is progressing with regular meetings of the steering group which involve both staff and Members. The most recent meeting focussed on the transformation project with a presentation from Howard Crompton and a discussion on how this will improve the council's future effectiveness.

Staff and management development initiatives linked to Shaping our Future are detailed in section 3.10.

3.10 **Learning & Employee Engagement**

3.10.1 Staff communication: The team have continued to keep staff informed on a variety of topics which help to support wellbeing, as well as reviewing the content available on our GROW Zone learning management system to ensure that staff have the tools they need whilst they continue to work remotely. We are encouraging staff to share the innovative ways they are keeping in touch with each other and we have recently introduced a monthly "virtual kitchen" on Zoom. This enables staff to drop in for a chat with colleagues from other teams over the course of an hour, with staff feedback being very positive.

3.10.2 Monthly half day sessions dedicated to personal and professional development for all staff started in January. The topics covered so far have included employee wellbeing, the corporate Values and Behaviours, and equality and diversity. The Learning & Employee Engagement team provide guidance to help Managers to run team activities and are able to signpost staff to various resources that are available. Whilst some months there may be corporately arranged activities or focussed topics, other months will allow staff and managers time to work with their teams or on their own personal development.

3.10.3 Service Manager Development Programme: We are due to launch a new programme at the end of March which will consist of a number of virtual workshops to develop our service managers. The programme aims to improve leadership skills, as well as covering topics such as motivation, performance and effectiveness. It is also intended to link management style with our corporate Values and Behaviours to help further embed them and bring them to life.

3.10.4 We have recently undertaken a staff survey to assess the current views on working from home and the impact on staff morale and wellbeing. We have used many of the questions from the first survey in order to gauge how things have changed, and to understand what other support or resources may be needed. Results will be analysed and reported at the end of March.

3.11 **Absence**

3.11.1 Absence figures for the rolling 12-month period are shown in Table 1 as absence days lost per employee. The short-term absence target is 3.5 days per year, and we are currently under target with 2.74 days in this rolling period.

Table 1

Rolling 12 months	Absence days lost per employee		
	Total	Long-term	Short-term
Feb-20	0.46	0.09	0.37
Mar-20	0.37	0.12	0.25
Apr-20	0.19	0.10	0.09
May-20	0.26	0.10	0.16
Jun-20	0.44	0.14	0.30
Jul-20	0.67	0.42	0.25
Aug-20	0.50	0.25	0.25
Sep-20	0.54	0.31	0.23
Oct-20	0.49	0.35	0.14
Nov-20	0.52	0.26	0.26
Dec-20	0.34	0.18	0.16
Jan-21	0.44	0.16	0.28
Total	5.22	2.48	2.74

311.2 Short-term absence has been lower than in previous years, partly due to the majority of staff working from home. We know that homeworking can help to reduce the level of minor absences as staff who are not feeling 100% may feel more inclined to continue to work in their home without having to commute to the office. In addition, the high level of homeworking and lower levels of social contact has probably helped by reducing the number of bugs and infections being passed between colleagues.

3.11.3 Levels of long-term absence have improved in the last couple of months with a number of previously absent staff being supported back to work on phased returns. Three out of four currently cases are related to mental health issues and the team are actively supporting these utilising Occupational Health where appropriate.

3.11.4 Since April we have had 17 staff reported as absent from work due to COVID-19 accounting for a total of 66 days lost. There have been other cases where staff have had COVID-19 but with little or no symptoms and therefore have not be included in the absence figures as they have been able to continue working from home. The majority of the cases that have been reported have been during this second wave.

3.12 Leavers and Turnover

Year (1 April – 31 March)	
2013/14	10.1%
2014/15	12.6%
2015/16	15.1%
2016/17	9.7%
2017/18	13.0%
2018/19	12.8%
2019/20	10.7%

Turnover figures exclude redundancies, retirement, apprenticeships and fixed term contracts).

Since the start of the April 2020 we have seen a drop in the number of staff leavers reflecting the current economic downturn and more limited employment opportunities available. There have been 23 leavers in the period April 2020 – January 2021 compared to 43 leavers in the same comparison period last year.

4.0 **NEXT STEPS**

- 4.1 Progress against the HR Service plan, and work on the Covid 19 recovery as well as work on Shaping our Future will be reported to all quarterly JSCC Meetings.

5.0 **CONTACT OFFICERS**

Author

- 5.1 Jo Keshishian
Interim Human Resources Services Manager
Tel: 01462 474314
jo.keshishian@north-herts.gov.uk

- 5.2 Ian Couper
Service Director – Resources
01462 474243
ian.couper@north-herts.gov.uk